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Antonio Jesús Calzado Llamas

HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS IN EUROPE

Between digitization of crime and policy response¹

Belkacem Ghania²

ABSTRACT: This study examines human trafficking in Europe through the activities of organized crime networks and the use of social media platforms, highlighting key concepts, statistical trends, and comparative case studies between Belgium and Germany. It aims to analyze the relationship between digital platforms and criminal networks in facilitating human trafficking and to assess the effectiveness of the European Union's dual approach, which combines a legislative framework with practical measures. The methodology includes legal analysis, the use of Eurostat 2024 data, and comparative case studies, focusing on methods of exploitation, victim characteristics, and the use of digital technologies. The results indicate a strong link between digital platforms and criminal networks, with various forms of exploitation including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and child exploitation. The study emphasizes the need for an integrated European strategy that strengthens legislation, institutional coordination, victim protection, and technological oversight to effectively combat the human trafficking network.

KEYWORDS: Human Trafficking; Criminal networks; Protection of Victims;

REDES DE TRÁFICO DE SERES HUMANOS NA EUROPA: ENTRE A DIGITALIZAÇÃO DO CRIME E A RESPOSTA POLÍTICA

RESUMO: Este estudo examina o tráfico de seres humanos na Europa através das atividades de redes de crime organizado e do uso de plataformas de redes sociais, destacando conceitos-chave, tendências estatísticas e estudos de caso comparativos entre a Bélgica e a Alemanha. O objetivo é analisar a relação entre as plataformas digitais e as redes criminosas na facilitação do tráfico de seres humanos e avaliar a eficácia da abordagem dupla da União Europeia, que combina um quadro legislativo com medidas práticas. A metodologia inclui análise jurídica, utilização de dados do Eurostat 2024 e estudos de caso comparativos, com foco nos métodos de exploração, nas características das vítimas e na utilização de tecnologias digitais. Os resultados indicam uma forte ligação entre as plataformas digitais e as redes criminosas, com várias formas de exploração, incluindo exploração sexual, trabalho forçado e exploração infantil. O estudo enfatiza a necessidade de uma estratégia europeia integrada que fortaleça a legislação, a coordenação institucional, a proteção das vítimas e a supervisão tecnológica para combater eficazmente a rede de tráfico de seres humanos.

1. Belkacem Ghania, "Human trafficking networks in Europe: between digitization of crime and policy response", *Latin American Journal of European Studies* 6, no. 1 (2026): p. 321 et seq.
2. Belkacem Ghania, PhD Student, Faculty of Law, University of Miskolc, 3515 Miskolc, Hungary. <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0064-3711>.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tráfico de Seres Humanos; Redes criminosas; Proteção das vítimas;

TABLE OF CONTENTS: Introduction; 1. The conceptual framework for human trafficking, criminal networks, and social media platforms; 1.1 Definition of human trafficking; 1.2 Organized criminal networks: definition and characteristics; 1.3 Definition of social media platforms; 2. The practical reality of human trafficking networks in Europe; 2.1 A statistical overview of human trafficking in Europe; 2.2 Case study: Belgium – Exploitation of children in drug trafficking networks; 2.3 Case study: Germany – sexual exploitation through criminal networks; 3. European efforts to combat human trafficking networks; 3.1 The legislative approach; 3.2 The practical approach; Final Considerations; References.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is witnessing an increase in human trafficking through organized crime networks and digital social media platforms, posing a complex and multidimensional challenge at both the legal and practical levels. This study aims to shed light on human trafficking crimes and analyze the relationship between criminal networks and digital platforms in facilitating human trafficking, focusing on European experiences and comparing models in Belgium and Germany, as well as the approach taken to combat these crimes.

The importance of this study stems from the need for a multidisciplinary understanding of law and practice, particularly in light of digital developments and the emergence of cross-border crimes, where technology is used to recruit and exploit victims in complex ways. The study also highlights the standards adopted by member states in coordinating their legal and regulatory efforts to combat this crime, including the protection of the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopted an analytical and comparative approach combining a review of legal literature and European statistics (Eurostat 2024) with an analysis of case studies in Belgium and Germany, focusing on how criminal networks operate and exploit digital platforms. A multi-level approach was also used to link the European legislative framework to practical mechanisms on the ground, including joint investigations, preventive measures, and digital mechanisms to combat crime.

The study starts from the premise that effective action against human trafficking depends on the integration of the European legislative framework, practical tools in the field, and digital technologies, taking into account national differences and the *modus operandi* of criminal networks. The study also aims to test the capacity of different national models, such as those in Belgium and Germany, to apply this integration in the face of contemporary forms of human trafficking.

Through this analysis, the study seeks to paint a true picture of these crimes in their three dimensions: criminal acts, criminal networks, and social media platforms, in order to curb the spread of crime across digital borders and highlight the pivotal role of coordination between European institutions and their efforts as a model for global application.

1 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING, CRIMINAL NETWORKS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The study of human trafficking via social media requires defining the conceptual framework of the basic concepts associated with this phenomenon. Therefore, this chapter will clarify the meaning of human trafficking, social media platforms, and criminal networks, providing a theoretical basis for analyzing this crime in the European context.

1.1 Definition of human trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex crime and a multidimensional social phenomenon that has received increasing attention in legal and social literature with the aim of arriving at a comprehensive and accurate definition. Based on this, this sub-chapter will highlight the various dimensions of this phenomenon and analyze them from multiple angles:

The American academic and researcher in criminology and criminal justice Alese C. Wooditch, in her explanation of the crime of human trafficking, clarified that: human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery, based on the illegal transport of individuals using force or deception, to exploit them either in labor,

sexual exploitation, or any activity that generates financial benefit for others. She added: the United States defines this crime as the purposeful transportation of a person for exploitation, and does not include organ removal within this definition, but rather it involves sex and labor trafficking.³ The U.S. Department of Justice provided legal interpretation in this regard, stating that this crime, also known as trafficking in persons, involves compelling or coercing a person to provide labor or services, or to engage in commercial sex acts. The coercion may be covert or overt, physical or psychological. Exploitation of a minor in commercial sex acts, even without the use of any form of force, fraud, or coercion, falls under this crime.⁴

In addition, Sylvia Walby And Karen A. Shire, they are researchers in sociology and criminology, discussed human trafficking, as a multifaceted social phenomenon involving the use of coercion to extract profits from activities. They explained that it takes advantage of the vulnerability of others, clarifying that the use of coercion means that this is not free labor. As a phenomenon, it often includes violence, which represents the physical form of coercion, but the physical element is not a prerequisite for coercion. Coercion may take the form of debt exploitation or threats of harm to the individual or those who hold influence over him, which could indirectly harm him. Violence and coercion are interpreted from the perspective of power; that is, they are two distinct forms of power. Coercion is a form of power in which one person can compel another to do what they want, even against their will, and to their detriment, or when they are in a situation where they have no reasonable alternative, as they emphasize that the existence of consent does not negate the individual's status as a victim. They went on to state that the purpose of violence is to cause physical harm; therefore, all violence is coercion.⁵

3. Alese C. Wooditch, "Human Trafficking," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, December 31, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/search?query=human%20trafficking>.
4. U.S. Department of Justice, "What Is Human Trafficking?", last modified June 26, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking/what-is-human-trafficking>.
5. Sylvia Walby and Karen A. Shire, *Trafficking Chains: Modern Slavery in Society* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, May 21, 2024), 2.

Furthermore, the guide published by SOMO – Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen and La Strada International, entitled “Engaging the private sector to end human trafficking: A resource guide for NGOs,” described human trafficking as follows: “human trafficking involves the movement of a person, often but not always across international borders, for the purpose of exploitation, which can include forced labour”.⁶

Moreover, in the same context KOK (Bundesweiter Koordinierungskreis gegen Menschenhandel), as a large German network of NGOs and a coordination office that combats human trafficking, explained: “Trafficking in human beings is the practice of exploiting people by placing them in a vulnerable situation. This often involves coercion, duress, deception, or violence. Human trafficking is a human rights violation and can occur within a country or across national borders, in all sectors, and affect a wide variety of people.”⁷

Europol, as a law enforcement agency combating this crime, considers it ‘a serious crime that abuses people’s fundamental rights and dignity. It involves the criminal exploitation of vulnerable people for the sole purpose of economic gain. It is often transnational in character and its victims are of both genders and all ages’.⁸

The sources of these definitions of the concept of human trafficking varied between fieldwork, academic and activist organizations, as each has focused on certain aspects while overlooking others. However, the definition contained in the Palermo Protocol introduced an approach that integrates both detailed and broad perspectives. The preamble⁹ to the Palermo Protocol to Prevent,

6. Suzanne Hoff and Katrin McGauran, *Engaging the Private Sector to End Human Trafficking: A Resource Guide for NGOs*, 21 (Amsterdam: SOMO and La Strada International, October 1, 2015), <https://www.somo.nl/resource-guide-engaging-the-private-sector-to-end-human-trafficking/#>.
7. KOK – Bundesweiter Koordinierungskreis gegen Menschenhandel e.V., “Was ist Menschenhandel?” (definition page), accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.kok-gegen-menschenhandel.de/en/menschenhandel/was-ist-menschenhandel#:~:text=Trafficking%20in%20human%20beings%20is,or%20to%20determine%20their%20situation.>
8. Europol, “Trafficking in Human Beings,” Europol, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas/trafficking-in-human-beings/>.
9. Palermo Protocol. United Nations, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, November 15, 2000, preamble.

Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000) states that although several international instruments have been issued to combat the exploitation of persons, particularly children and women, no single instrument had addressed this issue in all its aspects, which necessitated the adoption of this protocol. The creation of a unified international framework for such violations, which are considered intentional crimes under Article 5¹⁰ of the Protocol, has made it possible to formulate a model that, when applicable to a set of specific behaviors, constitutes one form of the crime of human trafficking, as defined in Article 3¹¹ of the Palermo Protocol. Through extrapolation, we find that these behaviors consist of three basic elements that control this definition:

Act: This refers to recruitment, which can be carried out through enticement, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt. According to the United Nations, these acts are listed as examples rather than as an exhaustive list, in order to broaden the scope of criminalization and avoid rigid definitions that might overlook other forms of trafficking.¹²

Means: Through this element, the crime is committed and consists of threatening or using force, or other forms of coercion, kidnapping, fraud, deception, abuse of power, exploitation of a position of vulnerability, or giving or receiving sums of money or benefits to obtain the consent of a person who has control over another person. These methods render the will of the trafficked person defective, weakening or stripping it of its capacity, thus making the victim's consent to exploitation in the same context invalid. It is noteworthy that the wording of the article links the invalidity of the victim's consent (i.e., the trafficked person) to the presence of one of these methods. By implication, the absence of one of the means results in the absence of the crime altogether if the victim is an adult. Therefore, the purpose of including this paragraph is to absolve

10. Palermo Protocol, art. 5.

11. Palermo Protocol, art. 3.

12. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *"The Crime of Trafficking in Persons,"* E4J University Module Series, Module 6, March 2019, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/ar/tip-and-som/module-6/key-issues/crime-of-trafficking-in-persons.html>.

victims of criminal liability as soon as these means exist, even if they knew and gave apparent consent to being exploited,¹³ and also to prevent traffickers from escaping responsibility.¹⁴ However, the element of means is not required for the crime to occur in case involving children; the presence of the other two elements is sufficient for responsibility to be established.¹⁵ When the trafficked person is under 18 years old of age, this age is fixed and cannot be reduced, contrary to what is stated in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which allows national laws to set a lower age of majority. This reflects the international principle of achieving the best interests of the child and protecting him from any exploitation.

Purpose: It is required for the crime to be complete that its purpose is exploitation, which includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs. This is a Fundamental element that distinguishes it from other crimes, such as kidnapping, assault, and fraud.¹⁶ Even if the two previous elements are present, the absence of intent to exploit the victim negates this crime, provided the victim is an adult. The term “minimum” in the text ensures its comprehensive application, even to cases that are not immediately apparent. Thus, the element of intent has become a defining characteristic of the various forms of this crime, as follows:¹⁷

13. Blanka Hančilová and Camille Massey, *Legislation and the Situation Concerning Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation in EU Member States* (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD], 2009), 37.
14. Trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “*Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants*,” UNODC Teaching Module Series, Module 3, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/cld/en/education/tertiary/organized-crime/module-3/key-issues/trafficking-in-persons.html?>
15. Stephen Knight, “The Trafficking Defence in Criminal Law: Nexus and Compulsion,” *The Journal of Criminal Law* 87, no. 3 (2023): 192–206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220183231151920>.
16. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “*The Crime of Trafficking in Persons*,” in *Trafficking in Persons & Smuggling of Migrants, Module 6: Key Issues*, UNODC E4J University Module Series, March 2019, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/ar/tip-and-som/module-6/key-issues/crime-of-trafficking-in-persons.html>.
17. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (ROSEAP), *Application of Counter-trafficking Legislation to Address Trafficking in Persons into Criminal Activities: A Comparative Case Analysis of Select ASEAN Countries* (Bangkok: UNODC ROSEAP, 2025), 15–17, https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2025/Application_of_counter-trafficking_legislation_TIP_FINAL.pdf?ref=newsletter.freedomcollaborative.org.

Forms of exploitation	Definition	Legal basis
Forced or compulsory labor	all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.	Article 2(1), ILO Forced Labor Convention ,1930, N°29.
Slavery	The status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.	Article 1, Slavery Convention, 1926.
Practice similar to slavery:	Debt bondage: the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his or her personal services or those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined.	UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery (1956): (article 1(a))
	Serfdom the condition or status of a tenant who is by law, custom or agreement bound to live and labour on land belonging to another person and to render some determinate service to such other person, whether for reward or not, and is not free to change his status.	UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery (1956): (article 1(b))
	Servile forms of marriage Any institution or practice whereby: (i) a woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family or any other person or group;(forced marriage) or (ii) The husband of a woman, his family, or his clan, has the right to transfer her to another person for value received or otherwise; or (iii) A woman on the death of her husband is liable to be inherited by another person	UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery (1956): (article 1(c))
	Sale of children for exploitation any institution or practice whereby a child or young person under the age of 18 years, is delivered by either or both of his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for reward or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person or of his labor	UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery (1956): (article 1(d))

	the Worst Forms of Child Labor comprise: (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; (d) work which, by its nature of the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.	Article 3 , ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, 1999 (№ 182)
	International law does not define 'servitude', but it provides a definition for other related concepts 'person of servile status,' as a person in the condition or status resulting from practices similar to slavery, being debt bondage, serfdom, servile forms of marriage, and sale of children for exploitation. "Servitude" shall mean the labor conditions and/or the obligation to work or to render services from which the person in question cannot escape and which he or she cannot change"	article 7(b) of the 1956 Supplementary Slavery Convention
Other form of exploitation	The forms of exploitation listed in the Trafficking in Persons Protocol are non-exhaustive, and include prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, extraction of natural resources, exploitation in various industries and service sectors, removal of organs, begging, Illegal adoption, forced extortion, sexual tourism, criminal activity, Child marriage, Human sacrifice.¹⁸	

To understand the characteristics of this crime, we rely on article 1¹⁹ of the Palermo Protocol, which stipulates that its interpretation must be consistent with that of the parent Convention. Therefore, it is important to highlight what is stipulated therein. Article 3²⁰ of the Convention requires that its application to a crime is subject to the fulfillment of three essential conditions :the conduct

18. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "The Purpose of Exploitation," in *Trafficking in Persons & Smuggling of Migrants, Module 6: Key Issues*, UNODC E4J University Module Series, March 2019, accessed March 1, 2026 <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/tip-and-som/module-6/key-issues/the-purpose-of-exploitation.html> .

19. *Palermo Protocol*, art. 1.

20. United Nations, *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, November 15, 2000, art. 3, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf> .

must constitute a “serious crime” as defined in Article 2²¹ of the Convention; It is a behavior that constitutes a crime punishable by the maximum penalty of deprivation of liberty for a period of no less than four years or a more severe penalty, and the crime must be transnational, and involve an organized criminal group, which applies to human trafficking crimes.²² Referring to Article 3 of the aforementioned Convention, we find that the transnational nature of a crime is established by the presence of one of the following characteristics:

- » The crime is carried out in more than one State.
- » The crime is carried out in a single State, but a substantial part of its preparation, planning, direction, or control occurs in another State.
- » The organized criminal group engaged in the criminal activities operates in more than one State.
- » The crime has substantial effects in another State.

As a result, human trafficking crimes must involve commission steps that span at least two countries. However, this condition is excluded when the conduct is criminalized under domestic legislation, pursuant to Article 34²³ of the Convention. As for the characteristic of an organized crime, the Convention does not provide a direct definition; rather, it specifies a set of conditions that must be met by the perpetrators, as stipulated in Article 2(a).²⁴

At the European level, the crime of human trafficking is defined by the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (№ 197),²⁵ which was signed on May 16, 2005, and entered into force on February 1, 2008, after the required ratifications were completed. Article 4 of this convention adopts the same definition as that found in the Palermo Protocol, while Article

21. United Nations, *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art. 2.

22. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “*Transnational Organized Crime: The Globalized Illegal Economy*,” UNODC Organized Crime section, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/toc/en/crimes/organized-crime.html>.

23. *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art 34.

24. *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art 2 (a).

25. Council of Europe, *Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*, CETS № 197, May 16, 2005, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=197>.

2 confirms that the convention applies to all forms of human trafficking, whether national or transnational, and regardless of whether it is linked to organized crime. Article 24 further establishes that committing this crime within the framework of a criminal organization constitutes an aggravating circumstance.

1.2 Organized criminal networks: definition and characteristics

Organized criminal networks are a fundamental unit for understanding organized crime, including human trafficking, making the study of their definition and characteristics vital for analyzing their practical realities and ways to combat them.

In a report published by Europol in 2024, which examined 821 criminal networks active in Europe, including those involved in human trafficking, the aim was to enhance understanding and clarify what is meant by criminal networks, the report concluded that criminal networks consist of cooperation between groups and individuals. These groups have different organizational structures, while individuals may either be part of a specific network or operate independently outside of it.²⁶

Most members mostly come from various nationalities around the world, and patterns of Cohesion cannot be distinguished on the basis of nationality. In addition to sharing a common criminal objective, these networks form and persist due to strong social cohesion, which contributes to attracting young people to engage in organized crimes within such networks.

Structurally, these networks are subject to strong leadership that remains closely connected to operational activities, while maintaining the ability to exercise control and communicate remotely from global locations, and their composition is often international. Moreover, leadership is not confined to specific

26. Europol, *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), 6, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol%20report%20on%20Decoding%20the%20EU-s%20most%20threatening%20criminal%20networks.pdf#:~:text=Criminal%20networks%20commit%20organised%20crime%20for%20profit%2C,criminal%20network%20or%20operate%20outside%20of%20it./>

individuals; it can be replaced through inheritance, delegation, or reorganization, allowing the network to continue its activities even after convictions.

The most dangerous of these networks are those organized in a hierarchical structure; however, this does not mean that horizontal or fluid networks do not pose a serious threat.²⁷

John Evans, an academic author and expert in criminal law and justice policies with a focus on organized crime, defines criminal networks as permanent links between criminals that take a flexible hierarchical form.²⁸ He emphasizes their continuity, structured organization, and division of tasks among members, while also highlighting the flexibility necessary to adapt to the circumstances of criminal activity. Evans notes that these networks can be categorized into several types:²⁹

Type 1: Powerful and Centralized gangs, such as cartels, with extensive criminal activity and control.

Type 2: Less powerful and cohesive groups, more akin to trade associations.

Type 3: Groups Less directly involved in committing crimes, whose role is limited to providing expertise in specific areas or facilitating connections and relationships.

John Evan argues against of the terminology used by Edelhertz and his colleagues, who refer to this type of organization as a "syndicate," defining it as a criminal cartel or trade association. Evan supports his view by asserting that the term "criminal network" more accurately reflects the flexible, organizational structure of many groups that persist over time while remaining fluid and adaptable.³⁰

Organized crime groups, including large and permanent ones, have adopted this network form because it suits the nature of their illegal activities, whether through careful planning or trial and error. This structure allows them to mobilize appropriate resources for specific opportunities, a capability that rigid organiza-

27. Europol, *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, conclusion.

28. John L. Evans, *Criminal Networks, Criminal Enterprises* (Vancouver: International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, July 1, 1994), <https://icclr.org/publications/criminal-networks-criminal-enterprises/>.

29. John L. Evans, *Criminal Networks, Criminal Enterprises*.

30. ohn L. Evans, *Criminal Networks, Criminal Enterprises*.

tional structures often lack. Consequently, criminal networks are characterized by flexibility and rapid response. These groups frequently operate as informal alliances of entrepreneurs and specialists in specific tasks.

When examining the most notorious models of organized crime, such as the Yakuza, the Hong Kong triads, the Italian and American Mafia, and the Colombian barons, Evans observes³¹ that their criminal activities—which he termed “criminal enterprises”—have expanded to operate as networks. within these networks, they provide services and impose control through: Organizing relationships between different criminal enterprises, setting prices, nominating individuals to carry out tasks that involve committing specific crimes; Resolving disputes between groups, collecting proceeds; Securing protection from other groups or from the state, often through corruption.

Evans concludes that the term criminal networks is a useful tool for understanding organized crime. Studies by police, academics, journalists and others have shown the risks of relying on fixed categories when defining the framework for perpetrators of organized crime. This definition must be based on diversity, flexibility, and adaptability, qualities captured by terms criminal networks, is therefore more accurate and effective, especially in addressing serious crimes such as human trafficking.

Although the parent Convention does not provide a direct definition of organized crime, it specifies the principal actors involved. According to Article 2(a),³² an *organized criminal group* is defined by the following criteria:

1. A structured group of three or more persons.
2. Existence over a period of time.
3. Acting in concert with the objective of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses established under the Convention.
4. Aiming to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

31. John L. Evans, *Criminal Networks, Criminal Enterprises*.

32. *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art 2 (a).

As for describing a group as a “structured group”,³³ it is required that the group of persons was not randomly formed for the purpose of committing an immediate offence. It is not necessary for its members to have formally defined roles, nor to have continuous membership, and its organizational structure does not need to be developed.

Under international law, the Palermo Convention (2000), while not explicitly defining criminal networks as perpetrators of human trafficking, defines an organized criminal group in Article 2(a).³⁴ This definition requires that an organized group be structured, meaning a group not formed haphazardly for the purpose of committing an immediate crime, regardless of whether the roles of its members are formally defined, whether membership is ongoing, and whether the group’s organizational structure is sophisticated or simple.

This group must consist of three or more persons, exist for a period of time, and act in concert to commit serious crimes or offenses under the Convention, including human trafficking, to obtain financial or other material benefit, directly or indirectly.

In the 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the research team classified perpetrators of human trafficking crimes within organized crime groups into two main types:

1. Governance model: The group applies a security governance approach within a community or region, using violence and fear to impose control.
2. Business model: This includes three or more traffickers who work in an organized and systematic manner in human trafficking as a core activity within their operations.³⁵

In this classification, the Office relied on judicial rulings issued by competent courts, in addition to the findings of Italian professor Federico Farisi,³⁶ a

33. *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art 2.

34. *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, art 2 (a).

35. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024* (United Nations publication, Sales no. E.24.XI.11, December 2024), 55, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf.

36. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*.

researcher and academic in sociology and criminology, known for his research on organized crime and criminal governance, particularly in his book *What is Organized Crime?* in which he addresses organized crime from multiple angles, including the organizational structure of its perpetrators. In his analysis, he relied on a number of relevant definitions, including the concept of the “criminal network,” which began to gain prominence in the literature at a rate of 3.4% in the 1990s and 5.2% in the first decade of the third millennium.³⁷ He described criminal networks as more fluid and mobile structural arrangements that are quicker to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities. He believes that this framework explains organizational patterns ranging from simple participation in crime to attempts to monopolize markets or territories, adding that criminal opportunities and cooperation to seize them occur within these networks.³⁸

However, he criticized the network perspective in the study of organized crime, arguing that it includes various forms of participation in crime within its framework.³⁹ This position seems to contradict the provisions of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which clarifies that an organized criminal group exists regardless of whether the roles of its members are formally defined, i.e., the pattern of participation is not a prerequisite. This is proved by the way the structural framework of criminal networks is used to organize relationships between perpetrators of organized crimes (among them human trafficking) – even if it existed before – the virtual world (cyberspace) has been a clear contemporary example of this. Among its tools are social media platforms, which have enabled criminals to shift from long-term ties and traditional hierarchical structures (organized crime 1.0) to temporary, flexible, and lesser formal networks that can be linked as needed and according to the expertise required to carry out criminal schemes remotely via these platforms. while the criminal acts themselves still exist, carried out within a criminal network

37. Federico Varese, *Organized Crime: Critical Concepts in Criminology* (London: Routledge, 2009), 36.

38. Federico Varese, *Organized Crime: Critical Concepts in Criminology*, 36.

39. Federico Varese, *Organized Crime: Critical Concepts in Criminology*, 43.

structure, which has led to the appearance of what the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has termed Organized Crime 2.0.⁴⁰

1.3 Definition of social media platforms

Maheen Kanwal, an IT researcher, defines social media platforms as interactive digital channels that facilitate the creation of content, the sharing of ideas and information, commentary on other users' content, and its redistribution across virtual networks. Such platforms enable users to actively participate in social networks.⁴¹ In a complementary perspective, Shalini Narayan emphasizes that these platforms also support the development of career pathways. They encompass social interaction and communication sites, including Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn...; platforms designed for collaborative purposes, such as Reddit, Digg, Delicious...; multimedia- sharing platforms, including Flickr, Vimeo, YouTube, and Ustream, as well as platforms oriented toward entertainment, such as Second Life, World of Warcraft, and Mini clip. Additionally, they include tools for

instant messaging such as WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, etc. Among these, Facebook remains the most widely used platforms by users.⁴²

From a legal perspective, a framework for defining these platforms can be found in Section 1 of the German Act to Improve the Enforcement of Law on Social Networks (NetzDG), which came into force on January 1, 2018, and specifies the obligations of providers of these networks. From this provision, it can be inferred that social media platforms are online platforms that enable users to exchange and share any content, such as images, videos, or text, with other

40. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "New Forms of Organized Crime: Networked Structure," in *Organized Crime: Module 7 – Models of Organized Criminal Groups, Key Issues*, UNODC E4J University Module Series, May 2018, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-7/key-issues/networked-structure.html>

41. Maheen Kanwal, "Social Media Platform," Webopedia, last updated April 12 2024, accessed March 10, 2026, <https://www.webopedia.com/definicions/social-media-platform/#:~:text=Social%20media%20platforms%20are%20interactive,a%20Web%202.0%20application%20format.>

42. Shalini Narayan, "Social Media Platforms and Tools," in *Media and Information Literacy*, Infli-bnet e-book (n.p.: n.pub., n.d.), accessed March 1, 2026, <https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/lisp20/chapter/social-media-platforms-and-tools/>.

users or make it available to the public. The primary purpose of these platforms is to provide information electronically, and users are understood to be natural or legal persons who use the platform's infrastructure to access content and obtain information. These platforms also offer a space for communication, where content is usually directed to a number of recipients or where interaction between them takes place.⁴³

At the European level, Article 3 of the Digital Services Act (DSA) defines electronic platforms, including social media platforms, as electronic hosting services that, at the request of the service recipient, store information provided by them and make it available to the public. This means making the information accessible to an unlimited number of third parties and allowing the content to be distributed to multiple recipients. The definition further clarifies that the content is provided by users (service recipients), where a service recipient is understood to be any natural or legal person who uses an intermediary service, in particular for the purpose of searching for or making information available. The law specifies that only platforms for which sharing or communication is a primary function are classified as electronic platforms, whereas hosting or sharing that constitutes a secondary or auxiliary function within a primary service is excluded.⁴⁴

In the context of modern classifications of cybercrime, according to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention, 2001), including its Second Optional Protocol (2022), cybercrimes are classified as follows:

1. Cyber-dependent crimes: Crimes that can only be committed using computers, computer networks, or other forms of information and communication technology, for example, spreading viruses and other malicious software.

43. Federal Office of Justice (Bundesamt für Justiz), *Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz – NetzDG): Regulatory Fines Guidelines: Guidelines on Setting Regulatory Fines within the Scope of the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG of 22 March 2018)*, 3–4, accessed March 1, 2026, https://www.bundesjustizamt.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/NetzDG/Leitlinien_Geldbussen_en.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v.

44. *Article 3, Definitions – Digital Services Act (DSA)*, "Digital Services Act, accessed March 12 2026, https://www.eu-digital-services-act.com/Digital_Services_Act_Article_3.html?.

2. Cyber-enabled crimes: These are traditional crimes whose scope or prevalence is increased by the use of the aforementioned technologies, but which can be committed without their use.⁴⁵

These two categories have been divided into four functional categories: crimes against machines, crimes using machines, cyber-assisted crimes, and crimes within machines: including some forms of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, child sexual abuse material, and crimes committed via social media platforms.⁴⁶

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, such platforms may be considered an aggravating circumstance when their use contributes to the commission of one of the forms of human trafficking.

2 THE PRACTICAL REALITY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS IN EUROPE

Europe is characterized by its economic and social diversity, high level of digital connectivity, and widespread use of social media platforms among different age groups, making it a suitable model for studying the characteristics of human trafficking crimes committed by organized criminal networks through these platforms. Europe's advanced legal infrastructure and accurate statistical reports provide a solid basis for analyzing the prevalence of these crimes and the modus operandi of criminal networks. This chapter begins by presenting statistics related to this crime, then reviews two specific forms of these crimes: the first form relates to the forced exploitation of individuals in committing criminal acts, through the model of drug trafficking in Belgium, while the second form relates to the sexual exploitation of victims in Germany. Through this analysis, the aim is to highlight the role of criminal networks in the field in the use of digital technology

45. Jonathan Lusthaus, "Reconsidering Crime and Technology: What Is This Thing We Call Cybercrime?," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 20 (2024): 372, PDF file, Department of Sociology, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies & St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, accessed March 1 2026 , file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/Lusthaus_2024_Reconsidering_crime_and.pdf .

46. Dorothea Czarnecki, *Trafficking in Human Beings 2.0 – Digitalisation of Trafficking in Human Beings in Germany: Developments and Courses of Action* (Berlin: German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings – KOK, 2022), 14.

and different patterns of exploitation, thereby contributing to an understanding of the practical reality of the commission of this crime.

2.1 A statistical overview of human trafficking in Europe

Eurostat published statistics on human trafficking in the European Union for 2024 on its official website. A total of 9,678 victims were recorded, representing an 8% decrease compared to 2023. The data showed that 12 of the 27 member states recorded an increase in the number of victims, while 14 recorded a decrease, and one country recorded no change.

The number of suspects reached 7,966, a 6% decrease compared to 2023, which recorded 8,471. The number of convictions rose to 2,599, compared to 2,309 in 2023, with increases in the number of convictions in 15 of the 26 countries that provided data for both years.

The statistics also indicate that women and girls accounted for 63% of registered victims in the European Union, a slight decrease from 64% in 2023. The proportion of women among suspects was 24%, while it was 21% among those convicted, compared to 24% and 23% respectively in 2023.

In terms of forms of exploitation, sexual exploitation was the most prevalent at 46%, with a gradual decline in its proportion during the period 2008–2024. The percentage of victims exploited in forced labor or services increased to between 28% and 41% since 2019, after being between 14% and 21% during the period 2008–2018. Other exploitative purposes, such as organ removal, use of victims for financial fraud, criminal activities, and forced begging, accounted for 16% in 2024.⁴⁷

Consequently, this crime remains widespread in various forms, with notable disparities between countries in terms of the number and proportion of victims. The conditions for committing these crimes to prevail in certain areas. The

47. Eurostat, "Trafficking in Human Beings Statistics," Statistics Explained, accessed March 1 2026, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics#:~:text=many%20exploitative%20purposes.-,Number%20of%20registered%20victims%20and%20of%20suspected%20and%20convicted%20traffickers,convicted%20traffickers%20\(Figure%201\).](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics#:~:text=many%20exploitative%20purposes.-,Number%20of%20registered%20victims%20and%20of%20suspected%20and%20convicted%20traffickers,convicted%20traffickers%20(Figure%201).)

distribution of suspects and convicts indicates that criminal networks often consist predominantly of men, whereas the female element is smaller, reflecting the different roles within these networks, such as organization, communication, recruitment and exploitation.

The forms of exploitation show that although sexual exploitation is still the most common form, this has not precluded the use of economic forms of exploitation. This highlights the diversity of criminal networks' activities and their capacity to adapt in order to commit other forms of the same crime in order to make a profit.

Moreover, the table below illustrates the regional distribution of human trafficking victims in Europe, highlighting the differences between Western and Southern Europe, Central and Southeastern Europe, and Eastern Europe. It also presents the various forms of exploitation, the origins of victims, the proportion of domestic versus cross-border trafficking, and the extent of organized criminal networks involvement, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of this crime across geographical dimensions.⁴⁸

Region	Form of exploitation (%)	Sources of victims (%)	Domestic / Cross-Border victims (%)	Organized criminal networks involvement (% of reported traffickers)
Western and Southern Europe	Sexual 22 % Labor 39 % Mixed 16 % Forced criminal activities 22 %	From Central and South-Eastern Europe 28%, East Africa 9%, South Asia 8%, East Asia and the Pacific 7%, North Africa 6%, West Africa 5%, Eastern Europe and Central Asia 3%, Middle East 3%, South America 2%	Domestic 76% Cross-Border 24%	90%
Central and South-Eastern Europe	Sexual 50 % Labor 30 % Other forms 20%	From East Asia and the Pacific 3%, South America 10%, Central America and the Caribbean 5%, Eastern Europe and Central Asia 6%	Domestic 72% Cross-Border 28%	80%

48. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*.

Eastern Europe	Sexual 84 % Labor 10 % Other forms 6 %	<u>To</u> Western and Southern Europe 3%, <u>To</u> Central and South-Eastern Europe 6%, <u>To</u> North Africa and the Middle East 5%	/	68 %
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Human trafficking networks at the European level are characterized by being global, flexible, and multi-faceted, as evidenced by their increasing use of dual-cell structures, with one cell responsible for recruitment and transit and another for exploitation. Many groups within these networks are also diversifying into other criminal activities, including document forgery, money laundering, and other crimes. In some cases, the entire trafficking chain is outsourced to different entities that provide specialized services on demand. At the same time, exploitation is expanding to include sexual services, forced labor, and various street crimes. A study published by Europol on December 5, 2025, found that these criminal networks are now more flexible and interconnected than ever before, exploiting individuals' vulnerabilities and structural gaps.⁴⁹

In addition, an analytical report by Europol entitled *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks (2024)* revealed that Fifty-five of the most dangerous criminal networks reported to be involved in this criminal activity are as follows:⁵⁰ Human trafficking is the primary criminal activity of 36 networks.⁵¹ Among them, 18 networks are exclusively involved in human trafficking for sexual exploitation, based on data from 12 reporting countries. Their operational locations are France and Germany, with a prominent representation of Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, and Ukrainian nationalities within these networks. In contrast, 13 networks focus primarily on human trafficking for labor exploitation, according to data from 11 reporting countries, located in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Ukraine, with representation of Georgian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Uzbek nationalities. Exploitation is mostly concentrated

49. Europol, "A Rapidly Evolving Criminal Ecosystem: The Escalating Exploitation of Vulnerable Individuals," Europol Newsroom, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/rapidly-evolving-criminal-ecosystem-escalating-exploitation-of-vulnerable-individuals>.

50. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 35.

51. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 9.

in the restaurant, construction, and agriculture sectors, with a continuing pattern of comprehensive control over the criminal chain of operations for both of the above types of networks, in addition to five networks specializing in other forms of human trafficking. Nineteen networks combine human trafficking with other criminal activities such as drug smuggling, organized property crime, and migrant smuggling, with frequent reliance on document and identity fraud as a mechanism to support criminal operations.⁵²

The data shows structural differences in the patterns of criminal networks involved in human trafficking in Europe, depending on national composition and geographical reach. Eastern European networks,⁵³ which include criminal elements from the Baltic states —Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—show close links among themselves and with criminal elements from Russia, with flexibility in the distribution of leadership roles within the network. They are mainly active in human trafficking for labor exploitation within a wide geographical area covering France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In contrast, homogeneous Romanian networks⁵⁴ show a clear focus on human trafficking for sexual exploitation, with their activities concentrated almost entirely within the European space, with operational presence in several countries including Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, and Romania, as well as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Criminal networks composed mainly of French nationals are also active in human trafficking for sexual exploitation within France, with cross-border operational links spanning more than 15 countries, including Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and other European countries, as well as extensions outside the European Union to the United Arab Emirates. The Ukrainian networks⁵⁵ on the other hand, focus their

52. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 35.

53. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 21.

54. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 22.

55. *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, 23.

activities on human trafficking and cyber fraud, with operations concentrated mainly in Ukraine and Poland.

As for criminal networks composed of several different nationalities active in human trafficking, they tend to form based on shared cultural and geographical backgrounds, with different groups linked by similar social and historical origins despite their diverse nationalities. These networks often operate within EU countries while maintaining close functional and organizational links with their areas of origin outside the EU, thereby ensuring the continuity of recruitment and logistical support. In this context, networks originating in the Western Balkans stand out, in many cases centered in Serbia and comprising multiple nationalities, including Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Slovenian, and Turkish, as well as elements from other European countries. These networks operate across a cross-border geographical area that includes Belgium, Colombia, Croatia, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, in addition to the Western Balkans, with some networks not showing a consistent pattern in their nationality composition.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the complex transformation in the exploitation of digital space has become an integral part of all stages of human trafficking operations. These include perpetrators' reliance on posting fake advertisements using artificial intelligence, as well as on multilingual recruitment campaigns across social media platforms. Criminal networks also use encrypted communication channels to coordinate operations and logistics in real time, while digital surveillance tools enable remote control and monitoring of victims. In addition, these networks use cryptocurrency payment systems, often integrated with hawala or informal banking networks to manage financial flows efficiently and securely. Criminals also mimic the strategies of influencers and "content creation academies" to

56. Europol, *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*.

teach members how to lure and manipulate victims online.⁵⁷ Approximately 95% of human trafficking cases were facilitated online or through social media.⁵⁸

2.2 Case study: Belgium – exploitation of children in drug trafficking networks

Among the issues highlighted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in its 2024⁵⁹ report is the rise in criminal networks in Western Europe involved in human trafficking and the exploitation of children through their recruitment into the drug trafficking. Belgium is a prime example of this phenomenon, as confirmed by its official data, particularly in the vicinity of the port of Antwerp, a key entry point for drugs into Europe.⁶⁰ This trend is spreading to major urban areas such as Brussels.⁶¹

The exploitation of minors within organized crime networks has been on the rise since 2019, with approximately 100 minors registered annually as victims of forced prostitution among adolescents. By July 2024, 73 minors had been officially identified as victims of sexual exploitation and criminal coercion, during which they were forced to engage in illegal activities, including drug trafficking, theft, and prostitution, under the control of human trafficking networks.⁶² The seizure of more than 110 tons⁶³ of cocaine in the Port of Antwerp in 2022 reflects the scale and complexity of illicit trade in the country. Europol reports that young

57. Europol, *A Rapidly Evolving Criminal Ecosystem: The Escalating Exploitation of Vulnerable Individuals*.

58. Eurojust, "Trafficking in Human Beings," in *Eurojust Annual Report 2023*, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/annual-report-2023/trafficking-human-beings>.

59. Eurojust, "Trafficking in Human Beings," in *Eurojust Annual Report 2023*, 45.

60. WRD News Team, "Belgium Faces Drug Trafficking Crisis as Judge Warns of 'Narco-State' Transformation," WRD News, December 14, 2025, <https://wrddnews.org/belgium-drug-trafficking-ports-fuel-europes-narcotics-crisis>.

61. Lidija Misić, "How Minors Are Recruited into Drug Trafficking Networks in Belgium," Humanium, October 7, 2025, <https://www.humanium.org/en/how-minors-are-recruited-into-drug-trafficking-networks-in-belgium/>.

62. United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC), "Child Trafficking in Belgium: A Challenge to Tackle," accessed March 1, 2026, <https://unric.org/en/child-trafficking-in-belgium-a-challenge-to-tackle/>.

63. Ave Sunrica Gabriel Verodova, Devi Apriani, Jasmine Marshanda Rully Annindya, Sabina Putri Aulia, and Randhi Satria, "The Mexico–Belgium Drug Trafficking on the Rise of Criminal: Belgium as the New Drug Capital of Europe," *Mandala: Jurnal Ilmu Hubungan Internasional* 6, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.33822/mjih.v6i2.8132>.

people are involved in more than 70%⁶⁴ of criminal markets in Europe, often recruited with promises of money, status, or belonging.

Drug trafficking networks in Belgium rely on the systematic and deliberate exploitation of minors, recruiting large numbers of children, particularly from Morocco and Algeria,⁶⁵ often after luring them out of their countries with promises of education or job opportunities, paving the way for their integration into criminal structures. These networks employ a comprehensive set of mechanisms of exploitation and coercion in stages.

The first step is to attract victims through social media,⁶⁶ including financial enticement by offering small sums of money or limited services, exploiting poverty, social vulnerability, and weak family protection.⁶⁷ This is followed by a phase of intimidation, the use of violence, and the imposition of debt to force children to comply and continue,⁶⁸ as well as the use of drugs and physical abuse to control minors.⁶⁹

The main reason for choosing children for exploitation is their low legal risk and ease of replacement, as evidenced by the tactics of groups such as the Mokro Mafia.⁷⁰

Law enforcement data⁷¹ reveal that the roles assigned to minors by drug trafficking networks in Belgium are part of a tightly organized hierarchical operational

64. Henry Pope, "Europol Warns of Organized Crime Groups Recruiting Minors," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, November 14, 2024, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/europol-warns-of-organized-crime-groups-recruiting-minors>.

65. Annie Kelly, Lucy Swan, and Harvey Symons, "Beaten and Tortured: The North African Children Paying a Bloody Price for Europe's Insatiable Appetite for Cocaine," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2024, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/ng-interactive/2024/jun/11/north-african-children-beaten-tortured-europe-cocaine-gangs>.

66. Henry Pope, *Europol Warns of Organized Crime Groups Recruiting Minors*.

67. European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN), *Youth Recruitment into Criminal Networks: A Practice-Focused Paper* (Brussels: EUCPN, 2023), accessed March 1, 2026, https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2502_ENG_PAPER_Youth%20recruitment_LR.pdf.

68. Annie Kelly, Lucy Swan, and Harvey Symons, "Beaten and Tortured: The North African Children Paying a Bloody Price for Europe's Insatiable Appetite for Cocaine".

69. Annie Kelly, Lucy Swan, and Harvey Symons, "Beaten and Tortured: The North African Children Paying a Bloody Price for Europe's Insatiable Appetite for Cocaine".

70. Annie Kelly, Lucy Swan, and Harvey Symons, "Beaten and Tortured: The North African Children Paying a Bloody Price for Europe's Insatiable Appetite for Cocaine".

71. Lidija Mistic, "How Minors Are Recruited into Drug Trafficking Networks in Belgium".

scheme.⁷² This scheme is based on a hierarchical division of labor that aims to forcibly integrate children into various stages of the criminal economy, from direct operational tasks to roles involving the use of violence in the field. All of this is done under the supervision of complex and well-funded networks,⁷³ which have enabled them to gain extensive organizational knowledge of distribution routes, times, and locations.

United Nations reports⁷⁴ indicate that these minors are pressured into engaging in multiple activities, including the transport, sale, and storage of drugs, where they are subjected to a pattern of forced exploitation that compels them to perform tasks beyond their age, physical, and psychological capacities.

In this context, some minors are used as low-level operatives, transporting shipments through neighborhoods or serving as “extraction crews” by breaking into containers,⁷⁵ climbing the fences surrounding the port at night, they carry ropes, masks, or even rubber boats to pull drug packages out of shipping containers and reseal them in dangerous logistical environments.⁷⁶ Others are employed as field observers to provide operational protection for networks by tracking police movements and providing early warnings, reflecting their integration into illicit field enforcement mechanisms.⁷⁷

The exploitation of other categories of minors is also on the rise, with their roles being reshaped to become more like “agents of violence.” forced to carry out attacks against rival networks or specific victims to impose criminal control,

72. Annie Kelly, Lucy Swan, and Harvey Symons, *“Beaten and Tortured: The North African Children Paying a Bloody Price for Europe’s Insatiable Appetite for Cocaine”*.

73. WRD News Team, *“Belgium Faces Drug Trafficking Crisis as Judge Warns of ‘Narco-State’ Transformation,”*

74. United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC), *“Child Trafficking in Belgium: A Challenge to Tackle”*.

75. Bruno Waterfield, *“How Teenagers Are Lured into Cocaine Trade with Designer Clothes and Bikes,”* *The Sunday Times*, 2025, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/antwerp-teenagers-cocaine-drug-trade-55nnbnw8t>.

76. WRD News Team, *“Belgium Faces Drug Trafficking Crisis as Judge Warns of ‘Narco-State’ Transformation,”*

77. Bruno Waterfield, *“How Teenagers Are Lured into Cocaine Trade with Designer Clothes and Bikes,”* *The Sunday Times*.

as a method of intimidation to silence opposition.⁷⁸ This reveals a shift from transportation and service roles to deterrence and intimidation roles.

This reflects forced recruitment and exploitation strategies within a carefully planned organizational structure that aims to remotely control minors as tools for carrying out criminal acts in the field of drug trafficking, exploiting their social vulnerability and limited ability to resist or withdraw from this forced path. Its activities and expansion are supported by the country's central location, major ports, and membership in the Schengen Area, making it an attractive destination for victims and international drug trafficking organizations.⁷⁹

A similar pattern has been widely documented in the United Kingdom, where boys—both British and foreign, including unaccompanied and separated children—are trafficked and forced into crime, particularly drug dealing.⁸⁰

2.3 Case study: Germany – sexual exploitation through criminal networks

Germany remains an important destination and transit country for victims of human trafficking. The 2025 U.S. report on human trafficking in Germany confirms that,⁸¹ based on government data and reports issued by civil society organizations over the past five years, traffickers exploit both local and foreign victims within the country, with a particular focus on sex trafficking. In the same context, the 2024 National Report on Human Trafficking and Exploitation, published in August 2025, indicates that victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation accounted for the largest proportion of recorded cases, totaling 465 victims. By contrast, there were 171 cases of labor exploitation, one case of forced begging,

78. WRD News Team, "Belgium Faces Drug Trafficking Crisis as Judge Warns of 'Narco-State' Transformation".

79. WRD News Team, "Belgium Faces Drug Trafficking Crisis as Judge Warns of 'Narco-State' Transformation".

80. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*, 45.

81. U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2025: Germany* (2025), <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2130595.html>.

two cases of coercion to commit criminal acts, and 17 cases of forced marriage.⁸² These figures demonstrate that sexual exploitation dominates the human trafficking landscape in Germany. Victims include both German nationals and foreign individuals, particularly from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and West Africa. Other vulnerable groups include Roma children brought by their families, women from China, Vietnam, and South America – especially Venezuela – as well as Nigerian women and girls and Ukrainian refugees, including children.⁸³ Organized crime groups play a significant role in controlling this illegal trade in Germany. These groups mainly composed of ethnic and local criminal networks that exploit regulatory loopholes within the legal sex industry, contributing to the significant increase in trafficking cases. Such networks often originate from countries including Vietnam, Thailand, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Brazil, and frequently rely on deceptive recruitment methods to coerce victims.⁸⁴ In 2024 alone, eight criminal networks primarily engaged in trafficking for sexual exploitation were identified, involving individuals of Chinese, Turkish, and Ukrainian nationalities, in addition to those already mentioned.⁸⁵

An article by Maccha Körner of the Criminal Investigation Office of the Lower Saxony State Police Department analyzed the “Loveboy” method⁸⁶ as a common mechanism used in cases of sexual exploitation.⁸⁷ This analysis was based

82. Bundeskriminalamt, *Human Trafficking and Exploitation: 2024 National Situation Report Human Trafficking and Exploitation* (Wiesbaden: Bundeskriminalamt, August 2025), 5–21, accessed March 1, 2026, [file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/traffickingInHumanBeingsReport2024%20\(5\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/traffickingInHumanBeingsReport2024%20(5).pdf).

83. U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2025: Germany* (2025).

84. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Global Organized Crime Index 2025: Germany Country Profile* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025), accessed March 1, 2026, https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2025/english/ocindex_profile_germany_2025.pdf.

85. Bundeskriminalamt, *Human Trafficking and Exploitation: 2024 National Situation Report Human Trafficking and Exploitation*, 28.

86. Mascha Körner, “Police Investigations in ‘Loveboy’ Cases: The Modus Operandi of ‘Loveboys’ – Challenges of Law Enforcement in Dealing with the Offence of Trafficking in Human Beings,” *SIK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice* (International Edition, September 2022), accessed March 1, 2026, https://www.bmi.gv.at/104/Wissenschaft_und_Forschung/SIAK-Journal/InternationalEdition/files/Koerner_IE_2022.pdf.

87. Europol, *Criminal Networks Involved in the Trafficking and Exploitation of Underage Victims in the European Union* (The Hague: Europol, October 2018), 35, accessed March 1, 2026, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/23-11_report_child_trafficking.pdf.

on qualitative interviews conducted with German police officers specializing in human trafficking and organized crime, each with an average of nine years of professional experience, during the period from 2017 to 2019.⁸⁸ The “*Loverboy*” method is widely used by traffickers to target young people,⁸⁹ particularly those facing economic or social vulnerabilities.⁹⁰ Migrants may also be especially vulnerable to sex trafficking because of their sexual orientation or identity, as traffickers lure them with promises of attractive working conditions and high wages before their arrival.⁹¹ The method typically begins with recruitment of a victim through the establishment of a deceptive romantic relationship between a member of the criminal network and the potential victim.⁹² Traffickers attract victims with expensive gifts and promise of a better life abroad.⁹³ After the relationship develops, victims often leave their families in search of love and new opportunities in another country. However, upon arrival at their destination, they are forced into prostitution for the benefit of the trafficker who controls them, using a combination of affection, violence, and sometimes threats directed at them or their families in their home country.⁹⁴ Victims frequently remain trapped in this situation because they continue believe in promises of a shared future or perceive the exploitation as temporary work in prostitution. During what is often described as the “infatuation phase”, victims may act loyally toward the trafficker or remain unaware of the exploitation due to emotional dependency and a desire for attention and recognition. In addition, traffickers often employ

88. Mascha Körner, “Police Investigations in ‘*Loverboy*’ Cases: The Modus Operandi of ‘*Loverboys*’ – Challenges of Law Enforcement in Dealing with the Offence of Trafficking in Human Beings”, 77.

89. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, COM(2025) 8 final, SWD(2025) 4 final (Brussels: European Commission, January 20, 2025), 3.

90. *Europol News*, January 23, 2025, accessed March 1, 2026. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/violent-human-traffickers-halted-in-germany-and-hungary>.

91. U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2025: Germany* (2025).

92. Europol, *Criminal Networks Involved in the Trafficking and Exploitation of Underage Victims in the European Union*, 7.

93. Europol, “Violent Human Traffickers Halted in Germany and Hungary”.

94. Europol, “Violent Human Traffickers Halted in Germany and Hungary”.

psychological or physical violence to prevent victims from reporting the crime, including blackmail and intimidation.⁹⁵

The digital environment has further strengthened all stages of this form of exploitation. Social media platforms and online communication channels – including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat – along with dating applications such as Tinder and Lovoo and various adult websites, facilitate the recruitment and control of victims.⁹⁶ This phenomenon is increasingly referred to as “*Loverboy 2.0.*” These platforms support the use of the *Loverboy* technique in two principals’ ways. First, they provide a semi-anonymous environment that allows traffickers to identify and target potential victims using publicly available information and images. Second, communication in digital spaces is often characterized by a greater willingness to share personal and intimate information, enabling traffickers to rapidly build relationships of trust with potential victims.⁹⁷

Furthermore, criminal networks impose strict operational rules on victims, including mandatory daily earnings quotas and required payments to the primary controller responsible for the areas in which the victims operate. These payments are collected from the income generated through criminal activities within that territory.⁹⁸ In many cases, The exploitation takes place in private homes or hotels rather than in public venues such as bars or brothels,⁹⁹ which makes it difficult for the authorities to investigate this crime.

95. Mascha Körner, “Police Investigations in ‘*Loverboy*’ Cases: The Modus Operandi of ‘*Loverboys*’ – Challenges of Law Enforcement in Dealing with the Offence of Trafficking in Human Beings”, 82.

96. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 3.

97. Mascha Körner, “Police Investigations in ‘*Loverboy*’ Cases: The Modus Operandi of ‘*Loverboys*’ – Challenges of Law Enforcement in Dealing with the Offence of Trafficking in Human Beings” ,78.

98. Europol, “Kingpins of sexual exploitation gang arrested in Berlin,” *Europol Newsroom*, September 27 2022, U.S. Department of State, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/kingpins-of-sexual-exploitation-gang-arrested-in-berlin#:~:text=2%20house%20searches%20in%20Germany,EUR%20150%20and%20EUR%20300> .

99. U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2025: Germany* (2025).

3 EUROPEAN EFFORTS TO COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS

The European Union provides a comprehensive framework for combating human trafficking, combining a legislative approach aimed at modernizing laws and expanding criminal liability with a practical approach focused on institutional coordination, field operations, and victim protection. This combination of law and practical application provides a better understanding of the mechanisms for combating criminal networks that exploit human beings, particularly in light of digital developments and cross-border challenges.

3.1 The legislative approach

In response to the evolving nature of human trafficking and its increasingly diverse forms and methods, driven by rapid economic and technological advancements, the European Union has placed growing emphasis on strengthening its legal framework to combat this phenomenon. As part of this approach, the revision of Directive 2011/36/EU on the prevention and combating of trafficking in human beings and the protection of its victims has become a cornerstone of the EU's strategy to address this crime.

In this context, on 19 December 2022, the European Commission submitted a legislative proposal to revise this directive in response to several shortcomings identified in practice during its implementation and with the aim of strengthening the effectiveness of prevention and prosecution mechanisms, as well as improving measures for the protection and support of victims. This legislative process culminated in the adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU, which entered into force on 14 July 2024. Member States are required to harmonize their national legislation with its provisions by 15 July 2026.¹⁰⁰

100. European Commission, "Proposal of the Commission for the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, COM(2022) 732 final," *Official document* (Brussels, December 19 2022), EU Commission legislative proposal COM(2022) 732 final, accessed March 1 2026, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022PC0732>.

The revised directive establishes a number of commitments¹⁰¹ aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of public policies in combating human trafficking. Among the most significant of these commitments is the mandatory collection and sharing of relevant statistical data on this crime with the European Commission through the statistical office of the European Union (EUROSTAT). Such data are of pivotal importance because they allow for a more accurate understanding of the reality of the phenomenon and facilitate the identification of appropriate measures to address it.

Moreover, these data contribute to shaping both European and national priorities, which are reflected in national strategies and action plans. These strategies and plans have become a new commitment for Member States in the fight against human trafficking and are to be implemented periodically every five years, alongside the development of guidelines, protocols and procedures aimed at assisting the relevant actors in detecting and identifying victims and ensuring their protection.

The directive further broadens the scope of criminal liability for acts of human trafficking. Article 2(3)¹⁰² provides that the concept of exploitation includes, in addition to traditional forms such as sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, exploitation in criminal activities, and organ removal, new forms related to forced marriage, illegal adoption, and exploitation related to surrogacy. This explicit inclusion of forms of exploitation linked to reproductive and family contexts contributes to incorporating contemporary realities within the scope of criminalization.

Particular attention is given to the digital dimension of crime. Article 4 (3)¹⁰³ considers the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to

101. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims*, Official Journal of the European Union L 2024/1712 (24 June 2024), accessed March 1 2026, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1712/oj/eng>.

102. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council*.

103. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council*.

be an aggravating circumstance, given their potential to expand the scope of digital exploitation and the difficulties associated with detecting, investigating, and prosecuting such crimes. In addition, the directive broadens the scope of criminal liability to include legal persons and establishes the accountability of those who knowingly receive services from victims of human trafficking, taking into account the element of knowledge based on objective and factual circumstances.¹⁰⁴ This provision encompasses all forms of exploitation related to the provision of services, thereby strengthening the legal framework aimed at addressing demand and limiting the continued supply that sustains such criminal activities.

Furthermore, the revised directive emphasizes the importance of institutional and multi-level coordination by involving national coordinators, independent bodies, EU agencies, and civil society organizations active in this field, while making the role of national coordinators mandatory. It encourages the establishment of independent national bodies to monitor the implementation of anti-trafficking measures and assess their impact, thereby contributing to the development of a comprehensive legal framework for prevention and deterrence. Given that the digital environment has increasingly become a conducive space for the planning and execution of human trafficking activities, it has become necessary to regulate this sphere through appropriate legal instrument. In this regard, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065¹⁰⁵ of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act – DSA) establishes obligations for digital platforms, highlighting their role in monitoring, detecting, and addressing online content related to human trafficking as part of the legal responsibilities' incumbent upon digital service providers.

104. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council*, art 18(a), Recital 27.

105. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)*, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 277 (27 October 2022): 1, accessed March 1 2026, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj>.

Since the consequences of forced labor often manifest most visibly in national economies, the European Union also addressed this issue by adopting Regulation (EU) 2024/3015¹⁰⁶ of the European Parliament and of the Council on 27 November 2024 on the prohibition of products made with forced labor on the Union market. This regulation applies regardless of the type of product, sector, or origin, whether the goods are produced domestically or imported, and whether they are placed on the EU market or intended for export, including products marketed through electronic means.

The regulation clearly defines the obligations of all actors involved in the production and supply chains on the basis of transparency and proportionality, taking into account the economic conditions of operators. It emphasizes the need for international cooperation, assigning implementation tasks to customs in coordination with the European Commission and the competent national authorities, to ensure effective prohibitions based on risk assessments within supply chains.

To strengthen these efforts and to protect the most vulnerable groups targeted by this crime, particularly women and children, the European Union has introduced additional legal instruments aimed at closing existing gaps and reinforcing protective measures. Through Directive 2024/1385¹⁰⁷ on combating violence against women and domestic violence, the European Union recognized that human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation constitutes a form of violence against women. This directive provides specific procedures and measures for the prevention of such violence and for the protection and support of women, complementing the provisions contained in Directive 2011/36/EU.

106. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2024/3015 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 on prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937*, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 3015 (12 December 2024), accessed March 10 2026. <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/3015/oj>.

107. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence*, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 2024/1385 (24 May 2024), accessed March 1 2026, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj>.

The European Commission has also adopted Commission Recommendation. 2024/1238¹⁰⁸ of 23 April 2024 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems. This recommendation aims to enable Member States to enhance their national child protection mechanisms in accordance with the needs and best interests of children. It emphasizes the importance of effective cooperation between competent authorities at all levels and relevant stakeholders across different sectors.

Within this framework, international institutions and civil society organizations are encouraged to adopt an integrated approach to child protection. All relevant stakeholders must coordinate their efforts systematically and coherently to safeguard children from all forms of physical and psychological harm, including human trafficking and digital violence, thereby contributing to the achievement of the objectives of integrated child protection systems.

Consequently, to prevent the financing of criminal networks and disrupt their ability to continue their illegal activities, including human trafficking, Directive (EU) 2024/1260¹⁰⁹ of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on Asset Recovery and Confiscation was issued. This directive provides for the tracing and confiscation of illicit financial proceeds, extending even to unexplained wealth, including cases where no conviction has been issued, provided that the conditions set out in the directive are met. These measures hinder the reinvestment of such funds in other criminal activities, sever the links between members of criminal networks that are based primarily on financial interests, and restrict access to services that constitute essential enabling elements for carrying out crimes, thereby limiting their capacity to commit further crimes.

108. European Commission, *Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 of 23 April 2024 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child*, Official Journal of the European Union L 2024/1238 (14 May 2024), accessed March 1 2026, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2024/1238/oj>.

109. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1260 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on Asset Recovery and Confiscation*, Official Journal of the European Union L 2024/1260 (2 May 2024), accessed March 10 2026, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1260/oj>.

3.2 The practical approach

The EU's operative approach to tackling human trafficking relies on an interconnected system of financial, coordination, and operational tools that aim to enhance prevention, detection, and investigation capacities, while also ensuring that victims are protected, supported, and reintegrated. This approach is based on the overlapping efforts of a number of European institutions and entities, each according to its respective competences and responsibilities, thereby promoting an effective collective response to this cross-border organized crime. Within this broader institutional framework, a set of complementary mechanisms operates jointly to reinforce the overall effectiveness of the Union's response.

To begin with, funding constitutes one of the key pillars supporting projects and initiatives aimed at combating human trafficking within the European Union. This funding is mainly provided through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF),¹¹⁰ which reserves part of its resources to support prevention efforts and enhance the protection of victims, while also financing programs designed to facilitate their integration into host communities. Furthermore, the Internal Security Fund (ISF)¹¹¹ contributes significantly to financing initiatives that directly target this crime by strengthening the capacities of law enforcement authorities, fostering operational cooperation between Member States, and organizing specialized training programs for professionals involved in combating human trafficking.

110. European Commission, "AMIF – Thematic Facility Work Programme for 2021-2022 and 2023-2027," *Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) 2021-2027*, European Commission – DG HOME, accessed March 10 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027_en; and *AMIF Tenth Revised 2023-2027 Work Programme (non-substantial)* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs), pdf file, 11, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/cfb0c5ce-c89c-48ca-85b6-db1bbf858aee_en?filename=AMIF_Tenth%20revised%202023-2027%20Work%20Programme%20%28non-substantial%29.pdf.

111. European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, *Internal Security Fund (ISF) Eight Revised 2023-2027 Work Programme (substantial)* (PDF), 5, accessed March 1 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a11c8a5c-17d1-4ceb-90c4-5001a8457b6b_en?filename=ISF_Eight%20revised%202023-2027%20Work%20Programme%20%28substantial%29.pdf.

Alongside these financial instruments, the EU has established operational coordination frameworks. In this context, the fight against human trafficking has been fully integrated into the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), which aims to support integrated multidisciplinary actions addressing ten criminal priorities identified by the European Council within the EMPACT cycle for 2022–2025.¹¹² The platform seeks to disrupt organized criminal networks engaged in human trafficking for different forms of exploitation through a range of operational actions, including joint investigations into labor and sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and child trafficking, as well as financial investigations and the systematic exchange of operational and strategic information related to this crime.

The practical effectiveness of this framework has been clearly demonstrated. Operations conducted in 2023 led to the identification of 7,536 potential victims and more than 5,000 suspects, in addition to the launch of 103 financial investigations and the seizure of over €4 million.¹¹³ Moreover, the platform has supported the development of innovative digital investigative tools by organizing several hackathons, which enabled the identification of online platforms linked to sexual and labor exploitation and facilitated the analysis of seized digital data. Notably, this initiative has expanded considerably, with participating countries increasing from 20 in 2022 to 27 in 2024, including partners from Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, the United Kingdom, Kosovo, and Serbia.

As a result, this approach has contributed to the development of a more comprehensive framework addressing the digital dimension of human trafficking, covering stages from online recruitment and victim identification to exploitation, and the detection of traffickers, ultimately facilitating the dismantling of criminal groups and limiting trafficking activities on digital platforms. Additionally,

112. Council of the European Union, "Draft Council Conclusions on Setting the EU's Priorities for the Fight against Serious and Organised Crime for EMPACT 2022-2025," ST 8665 2021 INIT (Brussels: Council of the European Union, May 10 2021), pdf file, accessed March 1 2026, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8665-2021-INIT/en/pdf>; and Europol, "EU Policy Cycle – EMPACT" (policy overview), accessed March 1 2026, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/eu_policy_cycle_socia_emptact.pdf.

113. EU Agenda, "EMPACT 2023 Results Factsheets," *EU Agenda*, accessed March 1 2026, <https://euagenda.eu/publications/emptact-2023-results-factsheets>

hackathons have become a valuable tool for training specialists in the application of digital technologies in everyday investigations. Several Member States, including Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, and the Netherlands, have adopted diverse technological strategies for investigating trafficking cases. These include monitoring both the open and dark web, conducting real-time open-source intelligence analysis, using web-crawling software, carrying out covert operations, and developing public-private partnerships with online service providers and short-term rental service providers platforms in countries such as Austria, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Finland, and Slovakia.¹¹⁴

Parallel to these operational efforts, judicial cooperation has also been strengthened. In this regard, Eurojust¹¹⁵ has played a pivotal role in supporting and coordinating joint investigation teams dealing with human trafficking cases. Currently, 66 such teams are active, involving several countries both within and outside the European Union, thereby enhancing international coordination in the pursuit of cross-border criminal networks. At the strategic level, coordination is further ensured through institutional mechanisms. The EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator¹¹⁶ promotes cooperation between EU institutions and agencies, Member States, and international partners, with the objective of developing coherent European policies to address this organized crime. This role includes monitoring the implementation of the European Strategy against Trafficking in Human Beings for 2021–2025 and ensuring the achievement of its strategic objectives, while also contributing to periodic assessment reports evaluating progress and policy effectiveness.

114. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 14.

115. Eurojust, "Joint Investigation Teams," *Eurojust – European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation*, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/action-tackle-human-traffickers-forcing-female-victims-prostitution-romania-and-uk>.

116. European Commission, "EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator," *Migration and Home Affairs – Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings*, accessed March 1 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/organised-crime/together-against-trafficking-human-beings/eu-anti-trafficking-coordinator_en.

In parallel, the EU has increasingly addressed the technological environment in which organized crime operate. In tackling the digital dimensions of crime, the European Commission has classified so-called very large online platforms and very large search engines under stricter regulatory obligations, including four adult websites: Pornhub, Stripchat, XVideos, and XNXX.¹¹⁷ These obligations include conducting regular assessments of the systemic risks associated with their activities and adopting mitigation measures, alongside increased transparency requirement and the establishment of reporting and complaint mechanisms. Furthermore, the regulatory framework requires platform operators and search engines to implement measures ensuring the privacy, safety, and protection of minors, and to notify law enforcement authorities of illegal content suggesting criminal activity is detected.

Beyond regulatory measures, broader policy initiatives have also been introduced. In October 2023,¹¹⁸ the European Commission launched a roadmap to combat drug trafficking and organized crime, comprising seventeen operational measures structured around four main pillars, one of which focuses on crime prevention. Particular emphasis is placed on preventing the recruitment of young people and children by criminal networks, which often exploit vulnerable groups in illegal activities, including drug trafficking. These initiatives are closely linked to wider efforts aimed at countering high-risk criminal networks operating across multiple areas of organized crime.¹¹⁹

Another key operational instrument relates to early -warning and information-sharing systems. In this regard, the renewed Schengen Information System

117. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 10.

118. European Commission, *EU Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime* (Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union, October 2023), pdf file, accessed March 1 2026, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/876347/EU%20Roadmap%20to%20fight%20drug%20trafficking%20and%20organised%20crime.pdf>.

119. EUCPN, "European Crime Prevention Conference 2024" addressed the exploitation of young people for criminal purposes, in particular for trafficking of drugs", *EUCPN*, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.eucpn.org/document/european-crime-prevention-conference-2024>; and European Commission, *EU Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime*, 95.

(SIS)¹²⁰ became operational on March 7, 2023, introducing new categories of alerts, most notably preventive alerts for vulnerable persons whose travel must be restricted in order to protect them from specific threats, including human trafficking. Such alerts may concern both vulnerable adults and children are entered into the system following decisions by competent national authorities, including judicial bodies. Consequently, when a concrete threat is identified, the individual concerned may be prevented from travelling and placed under protection, strengthening authorities' capacity for early intervention within the Schengen area. Complementing these structural tools, targeted action plan has been adopted to respond to emerging crises. On May 11, 2022,¹²¹ the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator launched a ten-point action plan aimed at protecting people fleeing the war in Ukraine, in cooperation with EU agencies and Member States. The plan builds on the European Strategy against Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025 and focuses on five main areas: awareness-raising and prevention, improving the response of law enforcement and judicial authorities, early identification of potential victims, and providing support and protection, with measures covering both Ukraine and Moldova.

More specifically, the plan includes the establishing or strengthening emergency helplines to ensure victims are referred to the appropriate services, while prioritizing the reinforcement of existing support structures and avoiding duplication or competition between hotlines. It also highlights the importance of involving civil society organizations in awareness campaigns and coordinating with national authorities for early victim identification and assistance. In addition, the plan promotes long-term programs supporting victim 'recovery and reintegration within host societies.

120. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 15.

121. La Strada International, "EU Anti-Trafficking Action Plan to Support Refugees from Ukraine," *La Strada International*, May 28 2022, accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/eu-anti-trafficking-action-plan-on-ukraine/#:~:text=On%20May%2011%2C%20the%20EU,be%20referred%20to%20appropriate%20services>.

Within the same crisis context, the EU Temporary Protection Mechanism was activated on March 4, 2022,¹²² following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Initially scheduled to expire on March 4, 2025, it was subsequently extended until March 2026 without altering the categories of beneficiaries. This mechanism provides immediate collective protection to large numbers of displaced persons arriving in the EU who are unable to return to their countries of origin, while also relieving pressure on national asylum systems by exempting beneficiaries from having their applications examined individually and guaranteeing their fundamental rights across all Member States, including residence, access to the labor market, housing, medical and social services, and education for children. However, the level of services actually provided may vary among Member States depending on their national capacities and administrative procedures, which may require the adoption of additional implementing legislative measures to regulate the extension of the protection period and facilitate its application. From a historical perspective, The EU Directive on temporary protection was first adopted in 2001 in response to the mass influx of refugees resulting from the armed conflict in the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Its first activation in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine therefore represented an exceptional step, illustrating the EU's capacity to respond rapidly and effectively to large-scale displacement crises while safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable groups, particularly women and children.

Finally, the operational dimension of EU action is reflected in concrete law-enforcement cooperation. As part of strengthening cross-border cooperation, collaboration with Ukraine expanded with the support of EU agencies, with the country participating in 19 EMPACT¹²³ operations in 2024. In 2023, Europol also

122. Council of the European Union, "Ukrainian refugees: Council extends temporary protection until March 2026," press release 575/24 (Brussels, June 25 2024), accessed March 1 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/25/ukrainian-refugees-council-extends-temporary-protection-until-march-2026/>.

123. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 20.

coordinated a three-day hackathon targeting online criminal activities affecting Ukrainian victims.

Subsequently, In March 2024, in coordination with Europol, a joint operational task force involving eleven countries was launched to combat the sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women and girls within the EU. Similarly, in May 2024¹²⁴ Europol supported the Spanish National Police in dismantling a criminal network involved in human trafficking for sexual exploitation, beyond these specific operations, the agency has also conducted extensive investigations¹²⁵ into criminal networks operating within the EU, allowing authorities to better understand their structures, operational methods, and patterns of activity. This knowledge significantly strengthens the capacity to plan proactive operations and coordinate efforts among Member States and European agencies.

The scale of international cooperation became particularly evident during large-scale joint operation. From June 1 to 6, 2025,¹²⁶ the largest international operation against human trafficking, known as Operation Global Chain, was carried out under the leadership of Austria and Romania and in coordination with Europol, Frontex, and Interpol within the framework of the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal framework. Approximately 15,000 officers from 43 countries participated in the operation, which resulted in the protection of 1,194 potential victims and the arrest of 158 suspects while an additional 205 suspects were identified. The operation focused on several forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and forced begging, with particular attention given to minors, while the reported victims originated from 64 different countries, most notably Romania, Ukraine, Colombia, China, and Hungary.

124. European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Progress Made in the European Union in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (Fifth Report)*, 20.

125. Europol, *Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks*.

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These examples illustrate the substantial efforts deployed by the European Union in the fight against trafficking in human beings. These initiatives have led to tangible results, particularly in dismantling criminal networks, reinforcing victim protection mechanisms, and strengthening preventive measures to reduce the risks and effects of this transnational crime.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results showed that women and girls represent the majority of victims, while children and young people are particularly vulnerable to forms of exploitation such as drug trafficking, as observed in Belgium. In Germany, sexual exploitation often involves manipulative strategies such as the “*Loverboy*” method. Digital platforms have evolved beyond mere communication tools to become central mechanisms for recruiting victims, maintaining control, issuing threats, and managing financial transactions. Networks are a key feature of this crime, which is based on a well-planned scheme that covers all stages of the process, from recruiting victims to ultimately controlling them, in line with the differences between diverse legal, social, and economic environments to ensure the continuity of their activities.

The study also reflects the considerable efforts made by the European Union at the legislative, institutional, and operational levels to combat human trafficking, recognizing the seriousness of this crime as a grave violation of human dignity and fundamental rights. However, the persistence and evolution of human trafficking practices require responses that integrate the efforts of all countries, regardless of their economic and operational levels, both within and outside the European Union.

Therefore, effectively addressing this phenomenon requires tackling its root causes, particularly the social and economic factors that drive victims into exploitation. Strengthening international and regional cooperation remains essential, particularly in the areas of information exchange and coordinated operations. It is equally important to reduce the gaps resulting from legislative

disparities between countries and to promote transparency and accountability within law enforcement agencies.

Ultimately, strengthening the global response to human trafficking requires moving toward a harmonized international legal framework based on the alignment of criminal acts, expanding the scope of liability, promoting the latest enforcement mechanisms, and providing a model for comprehensive victim protection. This approach would lead to a more coherent and effective global strategy capable of addressing the changing and transnational nature of human trafficking networks.

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